

XAVIER'S LAMPLIGHTERS

Thomas Francis Ritt

Hv/795
R58 1949



M.C. MIGEL LIBRARY
AMERICAN PRINTING
HOUSE FOR THE BLIND

Georges Bernanos, in his *Lettres aux Anglais*, wrote a fiery criticism of the hierarchy and the clergy far more caustic, severe, and even violent, than anything Blanshard could write. Besides the essential difference that Bernanos wrote out of a passionate love for Christ and His Church that could not brook in silence her betrayal by ministers of mediocrity who consistently sacrifice truth and justice to expediency, there is the other essential difference that Bernanos was not blinded by prejudice.

Blanshard believes that as a priest I am bound to find offensive any criticism of the policies and attitudes of

Xavier's lamplighters

Thomas Francis Ritt

ALMOST FIFTY YEARS AGO the Reverend Joseph M. Stadelman, S. J., was teaching in St. Francis Xavier College, New York City. In addition, he assisted in parish work and devoted a good deal of time to the deaf mutes in the metropolitan area. One day a blind parishioner, Miss Margaret Coffey, pleaded with this young priest to help the blind to find Christ. Miss Coffey's plea fell on sympathetic ears. Father Stadelman bought an old printing press, adapted it to the system of tactile print then in use for the blind, and set up shop in a basement room of the college. There he began to turn out reading matter to supplement the only two Catholic books for the blind that then existed.

From this basement printshop came the Xavier Society for the Blind, founded in 1900, which to this day is the only Catholic publishing house in North America exclusively serving those deprived of their sight. Down through the ensuing years Father Stadelman suffered and prayed as he toiled to build "a monument in paper" to enable the blind to "see" their way to the Kingdom of Heaven. Almost immediately after his humble beginnings the volume of work grew so rapidly that Father Stadelman was relieved of all other duties to enable him to devote his full time to the blind he loved. For forty-one years, sustained by his ardor and depending upon free-will offerings, Father Stadelman continued his labors. Finally, in 1941, after seven years of great physical suffering which deprived him of the power of standing and walking unaided, he died at the age of 83. During the last decade of his life his illness prevented him from carrying the full load of work, and Father Junius A. McGehee, S.J., served him as an able assistant. Though no longer attached to the Xavier Society, Father McGehee, in addition to his duties at St. Aloysius Church in Washington, D. C., continues to help the blind in various ways.

After Father Stadelman's death the newspapers of America carried accounts of his passing, and many printed eulogies of him. The most interesting and revealing was published by the New York Sun. "Men who

Catholics, especially of the clergy, high and low. It is an adequate answer to tell Blanshard and his supporters that my favorite author is Léon Bloy, the searing blasts of whose volcanic criticisms would curl Blanshard's hair.

Nothing healthier for the Church in this country could happen than the emergence of a Bloy or a Bernanos in our midst. If they emerge, they will be anathematized in many Catholic circles. They will also be warmly welcomed by many other Catholics, who, like myself, reject Blanshard's book as an unfortunate contribution to the cause of bigotry.

In his first contribution to AMERICA, Thomas Francis Ritt answers the appeal of Father Klocke—to make known, through the Catholic press, the needs of the blind and ways of helping them. Mr. Ritt, a free-lance writer, has also contributed articles to a number of other Catholic publications.

can't be spared," wrote Dave Boone, "are always getting the worst of it. He didn't get much publicity,

... but the Rev. Joseph Stadelman . . . rated top billing anywhere. At 83, and close to death, he was still striving to help sightless people. The next time you see columns devoted to some typical American, try to match his work with that of this devoted Jesuit priest.

Xavier moved forward into the future under the guidance of Father William F. Dolan, S.J., who had attended Xavier High School when Father Stadelman taught in the college department. During his high-school days Bill Dolan assisted Father Stadelman in the Xavier workshop, little dreaming that one day he would take over the directorship of this special work for the sightless. After his ordination to the priesthood Father Dolan taught at Georgetown University, and later became principal of Fordham High School for eight years. Afterwards he was an associate editor of the *Sacred Heart Messenger* and simultaneously served on the Board of Trustees of the Xavier Society. This background, as well as his close association with Father Stadelman, amply fitted him for the task of being Xavier's national director, a post he assumed in 1941 and retained until his untimely death in 1946.

The present director of Xavier, Rev. John H. Klocke, S.J., is a soft-spoken, eager and earnest lover of the blind. I remember my first visit to Xavier, now located at 136 West 97th Street, New York City. I received a cordial welcome from Father Klocke, and during my visit it became evident that he has the untiring priestly zeal so necessary to sustain and enlarge the apostolic work for the blind. For over two hours I was patiently shown through every foot of the large, brownstone building which houses Xavier's national headquarters. In passing through the stackrooms and the library proper, I was amazed to note the countless volumes of Braille books which bring "light" into the drab darkness surrounding the blind. It was a revelation, because I never realized the amount of time, work and patience entailed in the

production of books in tactile print, nor had I known that there had been various other systems in use, such as Moon type and New York Point, before the system of a French Catholic, Louis Braille, was adopted in 1918.

Today, Braille is made in several ways. It is embossed on metal sheets by an electrically operated machine and these plates are then placed in an electric press. Under heavy pressure, the desired number of copies are run off on a special chemically treated paper. The volumes produced in this manner, called plated books, are terribly expensive. For example, *My Daily Reading from the New Testament*, by Father Stedman, produced in Braille, comprises six 11"x11" volumes, and costs more than ten dollars to print.

As a new book comes off the press in plated form, Xavier donates a complete set to each of the twenty-seven regional units of the Library of Congress, thereby making it easily accessible to all blind readers. While plated books are very expensive, single copies of many books are made available to the blind more cheaply through hand transcription. This work is done either on a Braille writer or on a Braille slate with a hand stylus, and most of the transcription is done by volunteers at home after they have learned the Braille system. Various members of the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae, the Kenwood Alumnae Braille Association and the Sparkhill Community of the Dominican Sisters have done the transcribing for the Xavier Library. Recent additions to these volunteers are a group in the N. Y. Telephone Company and another in the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. Besides these groups, individuals throughout the country devote much of their free time to transcribing.

When these transcribed pages are sent to the Xavier workshop, they are proof-read, shellacked, sewed and bound. Then they are ready to be sent out by the librarian to any blind person, regardless of race, color or creed.

Although this loaning of books is important, it is only part of the extensive service rendered by Xavier. For example, one of its publications, the *Catholic Review*, is sent free to any blind person who requests it. The Society also publishes the *Catholic Calendar*, which contains, in Braille, an account of the liturgical year.

As I sat with Father Klocke, he ran through the files and handed me two letters. I was learning of the joys and the sorrows of the blind. The first one was from a social-service agency.

DEAR REV. KLOCKE [it read]: We are writing in reference to our client, Miss ———, who is a very devout member of the Catholic Church and finds a great deal of happiness and satisfaction in her religion . . . As she is able to read Braille, although she is also deaf and dumb, she would be happy to receive any material which you can send to her free of charge.

The other was from an orphan girl in India who wrote that she would not ask God to restore her sight if He would promise her that one day she would see Him face to face in heaven. Other letters of the same nature pour in from all corners of the world. Many, I noted, are written in a thankful vein, expressing the joy that comes

when the blind realize that someone is thinking of them. Each of them is a symphony which inspires a man like Father Klocke to promise assistance, at whatever cost to himself.

Speaking in Cleveland last December before a chapter of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Father Klocke said: "I personally had never been sufficiently grateful to God for the gift of sight until I became engaged in this work." This writer feels the same way. I didn't know or realize the plight of our blind—but I learned.

After talking for some time, Father Klocke gave me a practical demonstration of the "Talking Book." A professional reader, Father explained, sits in a soundproof studio and reads into a microphone the book which is to be reproduced in sound. The reader's voice is recorded on a wax-covered glass disc and, through a special electrochemical process, the disc is made into a metal master from which the records (Talking Books) are produced. These records, when sent to the blind, are played on a special machine which is loaned free by the Federal Government to any certified blind adult. The Talking Book is one of the relatively new mediums by which Christ is brought to the blind by the Xavier Society. Copies are expensive, however, and, unlike the Library of Congress, which receives a grant of \$400,000 a year from the Government to aid the blind, Xavier must depend entirely upon voluntary donations. It does not receive any financial assistance from any agency, public or private. A case in point is the recent recording of *Father Smith Instructs Jackson*. The Particular Council of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in New York financed this Talk-

ing Book in commemoration of their centenary. The cost? \$2,500. The figure tells the sad story and explains why there are not more of these "volumes that speak volumes" in the Xavier Library. Recently I revisited Father Klocke and he told me: "I'd like to record every



one of these Braille volumes, but it's so expensive."

"Father," I asked, "what can I do to help?"

"Tom," he answered, "write of Xavier in the Catholic press. Let the people know—they'll do the rest—but don't forget the social side of the work."

The social life of the blind is just as important as their reading. There is danger of loss of faith in the lack of adequate facilities for social recreation where the blind may meet to help one another and to exchange ideas. Catholic Guilds for the Blind are desperately needed in dioceses throughout the country. If guilds such as those in Boston, Brooklyn, Buffalo and Pittsburgh were formed, they would relieve the blind of much heartache and loneliness. Members could volunteer to take the blind to Mass, confession, novenas, and in so doing they would strengthen the faith of many of the sightless who now have the impression that the Church does not care about them.

Yes, the sighted are sometimes a bit heartless and

thoughtless, but this can be overcome by the exercise of Christian charity. Further, other parish organizations can materially aid in the education and recreation of the blind. A canvass of your own parish may uncover a blind person who would welcome the invitation to go to Mass with you. Will you try?

Father Klocke, like his predecessors, has a very small paid staff to assist him in his work. Several other women, trained volunteers, donate some free time. But the demands are many and the laborers are few. He goes forward in the knowledge that he is carrying on in the spirit of the pioneer priests who preceded him as directors of Xavier. Quite literally, they all deserve the title "Lamplighters."

As to the future, Father Klocke is aware that the need of this specialized work will continue to grow, necessitating the expansion of the services Xavier now extends to the visually handicapped. Nevertheless, he is aware of the fact that just as Christ cured the blind man of Jericho, so, too, His graces will be showered on the Xavier Society in the trying days which lie ahead. Those who are able to help it will remember Christ's words: "Whatsoever you do unto the least of these, My little ones, you do unto Me."

the hierarchy are the exclusive prerogative of the General Secretariat of the Action Committee—Minister Cepicka. Independent negotiations of individual Action Committees would—as has been proved by experience—lead to concessions on the part of the Communists, something entirely inadmissible.

5. It is the task of the Church Commissions to win the power of making decisions independently of the Church, and to act against it, and not to attempt cooperation with the Church. This principle is to be kept in mind when nominating the Commissions, in the event some of its members are appointed by bishops.

6. It is necessary to work in close cooperation with the Czechoslovak National Church. The participation of bishops of this Church in all State functions is required. It is necessary to receive its representatives with great honor. (*Directive to trustworthy persons:* The Czechoslovak National Church and the Evangelical Churches are to be made State Churches. The property of the Roman Catholic Church is to be confiscated and distributed among the State Churches according to their needs.)

7. It is necessary to point up the religious divisions among our people today and to call for unity. The drive for unity will be conducted on these lines:

a) At the beginning of the unity drive, the great

important

HV1795
R

C.1

Ritt, Thomas Francis

XAVIER'S LAMPLIGHTERS.

Date Due			

